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Remarks to the 89th Annual International Meeting of the Knights of Columbus in New York City.

August 17, 1971

Supreme Knight John McDevitt, Your Eminence Cardinal Cooke, Mr. Attorney General, Mr. Secretary of Transportation, all of the distinguished guests on the platform and in this audience:

This is a very special day for me, because to be the first President of the United States to address this States Dinner of the Knights of Columbus is a great honor. I am proud to be that first President.

On this occasion, I must say that to see the signs you held up from the States across the country gave me somewhat the feel of a convention. I did not say which party, because I realize that this is an organization above party. This organization has one party: the United States of America.

I want to associate myself with the remarks of His Eminence Cardinal Cooke. I would like to use this opportunity, speaking from this platform, to pay a tribute to him. I have known him, had the privilege of knowing him, for 20 years. I had the privilege of addressing the Al Smith dinner right here on several occasions-- and Cardinal Spellman before him, and now Cardinal Cooke, of course, has been a great religious leader for this diocese and for the United States of America.

But speaking as the President of the United States and Commander in Chief of our Armed Forces, I think that the work that Cardinal Spellman did Christmas after Christmas, year after year--and that now Cardinal Cooke continues--of going abroad and visiting our Armed Forces, this is something that all Americans are deeply grateful for, and we thank him today for that.

I have been trying to think of something appropriate to say with regard to my good friend, John Volpe, the former Governor of Massachusetts. And incidentally, he lost once and won the next time, too. I think perhaps I can put it in a timely fashion by pointing out that in Washington, as you know, these days it is said that it is impossible to keep a secret--the Pentagon papers.¹ In fact, I think the only secret people said has been kept was the announcement of the trip I was going to take to Peking.

¹The President was referring to the printing, by the New York Times and other publications, of excerpts from a top secret Pentagon study detailing U.S. foreign policy decision making on Vietnam during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations.

A statement, announcing the President's decision to make the entire 47-volume study available to the Congress, was read by Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler during his regular news briefing at the White House on June 23 and is printed in the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (vol. 7, p. 974).

There is one other. When I learned that I was going to have the privilege and honor of addressing this dinner, and I had a talk with John Volpe about the organization and everything that it meant, and he told me everything. The one thing he would not, however, tell me at all was the ceremonial. I said, "Well, John, how do I learn what the ceremonial is?" He said, "Mr. President, you have got to join us." Well, I am here in spirit. That is for sure.

I would like to address this organization tonight on America's problems, and particularly one which I addressed myself to just two nights ago. I think you will see how it is related to everything you stand for--a strong and vigorous United States of America.

You will recall that I talked about the competitive spirit of the United States in the economic field when I addressed the Nation on Sunday night. I pointed out then that it was necessary to take bold action to rekindle that spirit in America. I announced a new economic policy with three goals in mind:

First, to generate more jobs, because I believe that everyone who wants to work in America should have the chance to work. In the next 10 years, we must create 20 million new jobs for the American people. We can do it, and our program is designed to do that.

Second, I took action to call a halt in the rise of the cost of living. That is the inevitable legacy of war, one that steals away the life savings of so many of our people, and it has made it impossible for millions of American families to balance their family budgets.

Third, I took action to defend the American dollar against the attack of international speculation. I am determined that the American dollar must never again be hostage to the world's money manipulators.

Now, these are all Government actions. There is a need for these actions, because only by coming to grips with all of our problems can we expect to solve any of them.

And there is a need for bold, decisive action, because a nation can remain great only if it acts with a sure sense of destiny.

As Knights of the Catholic faith, Knights of Columbus, you, as much as anyone in this great Nation, feel that sense of destiny. From the beginning, America has seen its destiny--a call to set an example and to serve mankind, and that is why this Nation from the beginning opened its doors wide. America became the refuge of the world. Catholics came after the revolution in England in 1688. The French Revolution, the terrible Irish famine of 1846 put immigrants on our shores by the hundreds of thousands--millions. Jews from Poland and Russia, refugees from both World Wars, Hungarians, Cubans--all sought opportunity and freedom in America and helped this Nation gain its sense of destiny by constantly rekindling the sense of destiny.

Today we live in a time when it is possible for men and nations to break out of the tyranny of the present, to shape our future in the image of our hopes. We live in a time when it is possible for us to pass on to our children something Americans have not had in this century: a full generation of peace. And we live in a time when the free economic system of the United States can produce what we have not had in America for 15 years: a new prosperity with full employment and without war.

Now, these are the highest ideals of America, the highest ideals of any nation. The way to achieve these goals cannot be to throw away our power to defend freedom. We cannot let the apostles of defeatism and self-doubt chip away at the moral strength of America.

We are the number one nation in the world economically. We should stay number one. We cannot ease up and lose the economic leadership of the world. We cannot turn inward and fall prey to a new isolationism, great as the temptations may be to do that. Nor can the American people pass the responsibility of leadership solely to government.

Let's look at our history for a moment. That small nation, 195 years ago, 3 million people, 13 States, poor, weak, but with a sense of destiny, grown into the most powerful nation in the world militarily, the richest economically. How did it happen?

Well, America has become great not because of what government has done for people, but because of what people have done for themselves and for this country. That is the secret of America's strength.

And now we have some challenges for America in this time when we are very rich and very strong. It is not easy for a workingman to forgo for a while a wage increase that he deserves, and it is not easy for a businessman to hold the line on prices when his costs are high and profits are slim, and it is not easy for a Federal employee to cover the same amount of work with less personnel because of a cut in Federal spending. It is not easy for investors in stocks--and there are more than 20 million of them in America--to forgo an increase in dividends.

All of these we have asked the American people to do.

But I say that if the temporary sacrifice of each of these groups of America will result in stopping the rise in the cost of living for all Americans, this is a great goal, and this is worth sacrificing for.

America became a strong nation and a great nation and a rich nation because we have always had a competitive spirit. Twenty-five years ago, at the end of World War II, we were unchallenged in the world, militarily and economically. As far as competition was concerned, there was no one who could possibly challenge us.

But now that has changed. We helped the nations that we defeated in World War II, and those that were our friends to get back on their feet, and now they are our strong competitors. And there are new nations that have taken their first faltering steps toward being competitors.

We welcomed this competition, but we find that as this competition has come along from the other nations of the world, as they have done better--and we welcome their success--that America at times during this period, because we did not have to do so, have curbed our own competitive spirit.

Well, now the time has come to renew it. The time has come to be ourselves again--still compassionate, pouring out our wealth to all of those in need around the world when we can, still with a sense of responsibility toward others in the world, still fair, still ready to help those who need help--but also let us be determined to show what we can do, and let us compete with other nations without having one hand tied behind our back.

The turmoil and uncertainty of the years just past have strained America's spirit--the turmoil and uncertainty of war. They have led many to question the Nation's purposes and destinies, even its goodness.

We hear this "system," the American system, that has made it possible for this great and good country to come where it has; we hear that it has produced our abundance, protected our freedom, and yet it is denounced as oppressive and materialist. We hear our defense establishment in America, which has saved other nations as well as our own from tyranny and conquest, denounced as militarist and evil.

The right to criticize is a right we recognize in this country because it helps us to renew ourselves; it makes us strong; it makes us free. But I say to you tonight, when so many voices are running down America, the time has come for us to speak up for America.

It is very easy to sit back and criticize; it is hard to make the sacrifices, do the work, make the extra effort that makes the difference between a nation on the way down and a nation on the way up.

But right at this time, let no one expect to make his fortune--or his reputation--by selling America short.

Tonight I can feel in this audience, and I can feel in this land of ours, a new confidence in America, a new birth of faith in ourselves. I see a willingness to face reality, a revival of moral courage, a fresh determination to succeed.

The challenge of peace, the road to the new prosperity will require all the character we have. You and I know that the American people have what it takes, have what it takes to compete.

But when we talk about character of a nation we must never forget that that character depends upon the individual character of 200 million Americans. Where does that come from? It comes from the home; it comes from the churches; it comes from the schools of this Nation. There is where the character of the next generation, the coming generation, is being forged.

We must see to it that our children are provided with the moral and spiritual and religious values so necessary to a great people in great times. And, as Cardinal Cooke has pointed out, at a time we see those private and parochial schools which lay such stress on these religious values, as we see them closing at the rate of one a day, we must resolve to stop that trend and turn it around, and you can count on my support to do that.

Every man, even one who serves as President of the United States, relates an issue to what he knows in his own experience. I myself did not have a Catholic education. My secretary did. I was telling Cardinal Cooke and Mr. McDevitt on the way in, that in my travels to over 70 countries with Mrs. Nixon, my secretary, of course, Rose Mary Woods, has always gone. There has never been a Sunday in all of those travels, and some of them have taken weeks and months, when she did not go to Mass.

Something else: She is a very fine secretary, but she also has very great character. She grew up in a family of modest income, a large family. She went to a Catholic school, a Catholic grammar school, a Catholic high school. Just looking at my secretary, and I think John Mitchell and John Volpe will bear me out, if that is what Catholic education does, I am for more of it.

Speaking of character, may I put it in another context? The other day, as a football fan, I had one of the greatest experiences of my life. I visited the Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. As I went through that Hall of Fame, I relived all of the great stories of the football heroes of the past. Ernie Nevers and Bronko Nagurski and Mel Hein and the others who were enshrined in the Hall of Fame, and,

of course, Vince Lombardi. I thought of Vince Lombardi, along with the others that were there. He was enshrined that day I was there.

There were others that were as good a coach as he was. There were others who could play as well as he did, although he was a fine player and a very great coach. But the Lombardi legacy, in my view, is something beyond being a great coach and a great player.

The Lombardi legacy was character. He was a deeply religious man. He was a man who was a fine family man, and he was a man who instilled in all of those who came in contact with him a competitive spirit, a will to win, a will to keep fighting no matter how high or difficult the odds were.

I talked to him on the phone just a few days before he died. I said, "Coach, you have had millions of people rooting for your teams, but there have never been so many rooting for you as there are tonight."

He said, "Well, Mr. President, it's a tough battle, but you can be sure of one thing, I'll never quit fighting."

I can say to this great organization that what America needs today is that kind of character, that kind of competitive spirit, so that this Nation can realize its destiny. Our success is not going to mean failure for others. We, in our foreign policy, do not want to exploit anybody else. We want them to go forward with us.

But the United States of America, at this time in history, must maintain the strength in the free world to provide the help the others aren't able to provide for themselves. That means that we must be strong economically; we must be strong militarily. But a nation can be strong in arms and rich in goods and if it is poor in spirit, it will die.

This organization, because you contribute so much to the spirit of America, that is why you, it seems to me, are rendering a service that is so enormously important.

More than 300 years ago, in 1630, Governor John Winthrop told the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as a little boat was looking at Massachusetts, that "the eyes of all people" were on them. He quoted to them the words of the Bible: "You are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden."

Think of how presumptuous that was to say then. America, not even settled, a few colonists just about to arrive, and here he said, "You are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden." That was the spirit that made this country.

Three centuries later, America is like "a city set upon a hill"--strong, rich. The question is: Do we have the character, the richness in spirit, and the strength in spirit that a nation needs? What we do with the challenge of peaceful competition, what we fail to do, will be seen today by the eyes of the world and tomorrow by the eyes of our children.

I ask this great organization, leaders all across all of America: Let us join together to awaken the moral power that is the heritage of a hard-working people and, by our example, let America be the light of the world.

Note: The President spoke at 9:19 p.m. in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to members of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal and charitable organization.

An advance text of the President's remarks was released on the same day.

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